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ABSTRACT

In colleges and universities business students learn about organizational communication in order to function well in the business environment of which they will become a part. Although the organizational environment or culture is inextricably interwoven with the academic discipline of speech communication, the field of organizational communication entails much more. Literature is reviewed to examine recent research on organizational communication and to see how the academic world prepares its students to communicate in today's increasingly global business world. Recent organizational communication research, the Organizational Communication course, and writing as organizational communication are also discussed. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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By

Nola Kortner Aiex

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Organizational Communication: Research and Practice

By Nola Kortner Aiex

During the last decade of the 20th century, the world of business underwent many fundamental changes. Technological advances in computing allowed some employees to work mostly from home, and the prevalence of beepers and cell phones blurred the line between job and home for many workers. But so far, these new professional aids and tools do not seem to have had much effect on organizational cultures, except for making more employees work longer hours. A new book by Jill Andresky Fraser reports that 25 million Americans work more than 49 hours a week, and 11 million work more than 60 hours a week (Fraser, 2001). The stress on white-collar workers is already enormous, and the recent wave of job cuts and volatile stock market fluctuations will probably deepen that stress. Along with this comes news that many companies are now grading their employees–using academic-type grades–"ranking them from best to worst as a way of making sure that managers evaluate employees honestly and make clearer distinctions among them" (Abelson, 2001).

In the colleges and universities business students learn about organizational communication in order to be able to function well in the business environment of which they will become a part. And although organizational culture is inextricably interwoven with the academic discipline of speech communication, organizational communication entails more than just speech communication (Aiex, 1988). This Digest reviews the literature to examine recent research on organizational communication and to see how the academic world prepares its students to communicate in today's increasingly global business world.

Recent Organizational Communication Research

In recent years, the research in organizational communication has looked at such diverse subjects as job satisfaction, managerial briefings, the "outsider within," decision making, and the domains of business management/organizational communication. There does not seem to be a dominant theme in research, such as "organizational culture" was during the 1980s. For example, a research study which examined organizational communication as a moderator of the relationship between job performance and job satisfaction was conducted and the results presented in 1997. Findings suggest strong support as a predictor of job satisfaction and weak support as a moderator of the job performance-job satisfaction relationship. They also showed that communication dimensions with the greatest support as predictors were accuracy of information, desire for interaction, communication load, trust in superior, influence of superior, and communication satisfaction (Pettit et al, 1997).

In another recent study, Paul Gamble and Clare Keliher (1999) examined a series of managerial briefings in nine stores of a major electronics retail chain. Results revealed that managers were neither trained nor appraised on their briefings skills, prepared themselves indifferently, and made little use of techniques known to affect attentiveness and recall; it was found that the daily communication session appeared to have little impact on staff motivation or behavior. The "outsider within" perspective was studied by Mark Orbe (1998). Findings delineated and described the ways that traditionally marginalized group members communicate in mainstream organizational settings. Findings also suggest that the model's strength lies in its approach to studying diversity in organizations.

Frank Schmidtlein (1999) examined common assumptions about the rationality or irrationality of organizational behavior and found that decision making occurs in a complex context that successful college/university institutional research offices must recognize and work with. Findings indicated that emerging organizational theories suggest there are limitations on the use of data and analysis in the decision making process.

Kim White-Mills and Donald Rogers (1996) explored the common but separate domains of business management and organizational communication. The two researchers investigated which textbooks, conceptual books, and articles most influenced educators in the area of business-managerial-organizational communication (BMOC). Their findings suggest that there is no common body of knowledge uniting BMOC, but, in fact, they are three separate fields which overlap at present but which seem to be moving in three different directions (one technical, one critical, and one managerial).

The Organizational Communication Course

Ronald L. Applebaum provides an overview of organizational communication instruction in a 1998 article. He discusses the following: the fundamental problems in selecting an approach to organizational communication; the purpose of an organizational communication course; the structure and content of organizational communication coursework; and teaching strategies used in the basic course in organizational communication.

Another scholar/educator, Peggy Yuhas Byers (1998) advocates the use of case study discussions as an effective instructional technique in the organizational communication class. She presents a variety of formats for bringing case studies to life for students, and she cites the following sources for case studies: the World Wide Web, local and national news publications, local businesses and industries, and self-developed cases. Byers's article also presents methods for facilitating case study discussions.

Students need to know that organizational communication is not just getting along with colleagues in the workplace, but also encompasses various types of business writing (more on this follows in the next section). Heather Brodie Graves (1999) incorporates case studies in her classes to help students understand the issues inherent in corporate communication. She finds that cases provide a variety of contexts and examples for professional business writing that enlighten students as to the range of documents, rhetorical situations, and audiences addressed in workplace writing.

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A recent article suggests that communication audits serve well as educational tools for both student auditors and employees of organizations. It contends that instructors need to gain access to organizations, especially through internal audit departments; they should negotiate the exchange of essentially free audit findings for a learning experience and research data; and they must secure commitments from top management, other organizational members, and student auditors (Scott et al, 1999).

Aline Wolff, in a 1996 article, analyzes a large-scale communication project for MBA students which she believes exemplifies the type of projects that graduating students will be expected to collaborate on or to manage successfully. The article also considers the implications for teaching managerial communication to MBA students and recommends ways to integrate real world tasks into the curriculum.

The team approach can function well in business and organizational communication classes, according to Deborah Britt Roebuck (1998). She uses the Team Learning approach to teaching, in which students spend approximately 80% of their in-class time working in permanent, heterogeneous teams, becoming active and responsible participants in the learning process. Roebuck outlines the instructional activity sequence—getting started, forming the team-learning groups, grading, and using the challenges and benefits of the team-learning method.

Writing as Organizational Communication

Colleges and universities require that their business students learn the basic tenets of organizational communication, and this usually means a general technical writing course and a speech communication course. Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, for example, stresses professional writing for undergraduate business majors (juniors and seniors) and offers a required course in professional writing within the business school and not administered by the English Department. It also requires the university-wide speech communication course which all undergraduates must take.

It is more common, however, for such technical writing courses to be required at the MBA level. The example of Heather Brodie Graves's (1999) graduate-level writing class was already cited. Another example can be found in an English course (listed as English 339) and entitled "Writing for Government, Business, and Industry," at St. Cloud State University (Minnesota). This course is aimed mostly at graduate-level business students, and it emphasizes the essential elements of audience and voice. It is grounded on the assertion of some composition theorists that the absence of voice is symptomatic of a profound developmental deficit (suggesting an inability to navigate successfully the avenues of modern organizational culture). The course uses the classroom memo and committee minutes to facilitate students' development of an organizational writing voice and a sense of audience (Inkster, 1993).

As this Digest demonstrates, the technological advances reshaping our world at the dawn of the 21st century will have a powerful impact on organizational communication, and the academic community will be challenged to develop curricula and coursework capable of preparing students to effectively function in the rapidly changing environment. For additional information on this subject, please study the references provided below.

Nola Kortner Aiex is the former Assistant Director of ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication. Ms. Aiex has a Ph.D. in Brazilian Studies.

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